Let's Stop Teaching Writing

Thirty years ago, I entered the teaching profession determined to help students learn to write. I was on a mission, fueled by the strong views of the professors and master-teachers in my credentialing program. They made it clear that writing had long been neglected in our schools, and that it was our job to set things right. A budding writer myself, I embraced this task wholeheartedly. Looking back on my education in high school and junior high, I was aghast at how inadequate it had been. No brainstorming. No understanding of the writing process. Little discussion of structure and format, thesis statements, and topic sentences. How had I managed to write anything?

Things certainly have changed since then. Even though many people may worry about the writing capacity of high school graduates, the reality is that the writing curriculum has never been as extensive, demanding, and prescriptive as it is today. You would think these developments would have me dancing in the end zone, but I am not. Instead, I find myself holding my head in my hands and crying out: "What have we wrought?"

Over the course of my career, I have taught writing at every level-elementary, middle school, high school, and college-which means I watched and participated in the evolving writing curriculum as it made its way through K-12 and beyond. The result? I am left mostly feeling sorry for students who in the name of writing instruction are being asked to jump through an ever-expanding and increasingly byzantine set of hoops, but who less and less often are being asked to write. They may be able to create thesis statements and topic sentences, find details, write conclusions, and follow Modern Language Association style, but somewhere in there very little actual thought is taking place. In our desire to help students engage in the process of writing, we have defined a process that really isn't writing.

A case in point: When I was teaching 3rd grade, we were mandated by the district's language arts curriculum to instruct students in the following writing "genres": instructional, descriptive, expository, and narrative. To assist students and teachers, the publishers of the curriculum had included numerous graphic organizers, brainstorming worksheets, and step-by-step instructions on the process of generating and organizing ideas. With naive faith in the authority of the workbook, I jumped in. It wasn't long, however, before I observed that I wasn't instructing students in writing so much as dragging them through the process outlined in the worksheets. "Just tell me what to put here!" students entreated. "Is this right? Is this what you want?"

Even when I abandoned the rigid, process-oriented assignments, I was still left with the very odd task of teaching a "genre" that didn't exist in the real world, the instructional essay, in which one writes about how to do a particular task. When students balked again, I tried to write one and found myself stalled, just like my 3rd graders.

The time we wasted! The misery this induced! The emotional capital my students and I expended!

I wish I could say that this was just one misguided curriculum from one publisher, but it wasn't. While the common-core standards, and before them the state standards, don't mandate that a specific writing process be taught, they point districts and textbook publishers and teachers in this direction by detailing specific elements-structure, thesis statements, argumentative appeals-that need to be mastered. It's not surprising that in efforts to streamline the real and complex world of instruction, these standards get twisted into oddly prescriptive steps and formats.

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Thus, we have the entire English department at a local high school embracing a schoolwide essay format that calls for exactly three central paragraphs containing exactly eight sentences: topic sentence, detail sentence, commentary sentence, another detail sentence, another commentary sentence, a final detail sentence, a final commentary sentence, and a concluding sentence.

At a different high school across town, a history teacher hands out zeros to students who don't have the thesis statement as the final sentence in the opening paragraph. Meanwhile, a woman I know who teaches at an elite research university bemoans the fact that her students, among the best in the country, have mastered the five-paragraph essay, but can't develop a complex idea in writing. They are stuck, she says, in thinking that argument means offering three reasons, one for each paragraph in the body of an essay.

I could go on. The truth is, the more we try to tease apart what writing is and serve it up processed and predigested, the more we either confuse students or, as in the case of the elite university students, deny them engagement in the messy process that is thinking. At the very least, it is a benign waste of time and empty calories in the educational diet. At the worst, it crowds out the rich and complex array of intellectual nutrients we need.

So, I say, let's abandon it. Let's get rid of the narrow models, the graphic organizers, the formats, and the steps, and even, yes, maybe even, the five-paragraph essay. Let's stop talking about thesis statements and topic sentences as if they were the rhetorical equivalent of the Magna Carta. Let's abandon the ersatz genres made up by those who get paid to think up things for teachers to do.

What would we put in its place?

My proposal is modest, cheap, and deceptively simple: Ask students questions, read their answers, and ask more questions. Questions and answers. Nothing fancy. Much like home cooking, however, this kind of questioning takes time, it requires practice and honing, and the kitchen is a mess afterwards. But it is worth the trouble and the mess, for in this back and forth, this conference between teacher and student, real thinking and the work of real writing occur.

I am still on that mission to help students write. The only difference is that I find myself no longer looking back on my own education in dismay, but looking to it for insight and ideas. I realize that the writing I was asked to do, mostly in the service of explaining my thinking about the subjects I was studying, created an authentic engagement with ideas and content that was blissfully uncomplicated by format and process or half-baked notions about writing for a made-up audience.

It was about five years ago when I abandoned the 3rd grade writing curriculum and instead asked students a simple question about Sacajawea, whose biography I was reading aloud, that they became inspired and surprisingly fluent and articulate in their writing. "Does Sacajawea mean 'boat pusher,' as some scholars argue," I asked, "or does it mean 'bird woman,' as others argue?" Hands went up. Discussion occurred. Then pencils eagerly met paper. Really. And no one, not a single student, whined about not knowing what to write.

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